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Summary:

After all Brenner had lied to her, El couldn't bring herself to believe in love.

Tainted

El had heard the words, “I love you,” several times throughout her life.

Papa used to say it to her whenever she was good. After she let the bad men prod and poke her without giving a fight, when she would follow his instructions using her powers, whenever she ‘impressed’ him, she was always rewarded. Normally the reward was a small gift, like a flower or a piece of candy, followed by a quick, “I love you, Eleven.”

The phrase quickly became synonymous with “Good work,” and “Thank you for following my orders.” It meant nothing about care or emotions, it was merely a way to control her.

She believed he loved her. She didn't have any reason not to, because she was taught that how he treated her was love.

El thought she loved him too, yet she was scared. Brenner claimed he loved and protected her, but she was still terrified. So she escaped the lab. Escaping scared her even more, but she was beginning to learn living in fear in the lab wasn't what she wanted.

Then she met everyone else. She saw what the world had to offer. Eleven noticed the caring friendship between the boys, she saw the sibling bond between Mike and Nancy, she saw how Joyce cried while Will was missing. Did Papa cry for her when she left? She figured he hadn't, why was that? Joyce cried because she loved Will, didn't Papa love her?

The realization was hard for her, truly gripping onto the reality that it was all a lie, that he didn't love her. Brenner was another bad man, just a more cunning one. He didn't care for her.

The idea of love became tainted for El. The concept reminded her of nothing but manipulation, of how for years she let one person lie and hurt her under the claim of “love.” If that was love, it wasn't something El ever wanted to experience.

She didn't want to feel what love was. It was just opening herself up to be lied to and hurt and manipulated. It was all a lie, this concept everyone believed in.

Eleven had never experienced what love was. Her only experience with it was what she thought it was. To her, "love" was just a trophy for following someone else's commands.

Joyce was the first person after Brenner to tell El she loved her. It was late at night, El had taken refuge in the Byers home. They all said she was a strong girl who needed someone else to be strong for her for once, and Joyce quickly volunteered.

Tucked into bed, Joyce sat beside her, reading her a quick story before going to sleep. El started to feel drowsy, eyelids pulling down and Joyce's words started to drown out.

Joyce noticed this, putting the storybook down and leaning to give a quick kiss to El's forehead.

"Goodnight El, I love you."

With that her eyes flung open. Why would Joyce say that to her? What had she done?

El trusted Joyce, but there was a time she trusted her Papa as well. Those words of "love" were nothing but manipulation in a pretty package, smiles to hide abuse and forehead kisses to hide fear.

She didn't want Joyce's love, she didn't want anyone's. All she knew of love was that it was a deceitful lie, and she didn't want anyone to claim they loved her.

The next time Joyce said that to her, El couldn't hold back her reaction. A burst of tears over breakfast while Joyce yelled for Jonathan and Will to leave the room.

It took a lot of stammering and tears before El was able to push out what was bothering her. Joyce looked like she would cry listening to her. It wasn't fair, she was a 13 year old girl with too much pain, who already had a completely tainted idea of what love was.

Joyce did her best to explain it to El. How love wasn't anything she thought, how all the times the bad men said it to her, they were lying.

She never needed to have a conversation with someone like that before. Especially with everything Lonnie had done, Joyce always went out of her way while Jonathan and Will grew up to remind them what love was and that she loved them. She had never met someone so love-deprived that they couldn't even understand what it was.

Joyce explained it to El as a feeling. It had no subtext or lies behind it. It was just a word to remind someone how much you cared for them.

El took that in cautiously. She knew there were people she cared for deeply. Her family and her friends, all of which she was grateful for, but putting a label like love on her feelings was what concerned her. How could she label them with something that could so easily be a lie? Why couldn't she just tell them of her feelings without needing to have a label?

When people said it to her after that, El took it with a smile. She knew what they were saying, and it made her happy they felt that way, but she still had her own definition of love. Her mind still kept the word chained up with memories of lies and manipulation. She never told anyone she loved them back, because to her, that meant nothing. Love was nothing more than a word, she couldn't understand how others saw meaning behind it.

Eleven was fifteen years old when Mike first told her he loved her. They'd been dating for a while, and El knew she cared for him more than anyone else. He'd become her best friend, her anchor, and her favorite person.

They were walking in the woods, down the train tracks she loved to explore. Mike loved watching her explore them too, his eyes lit up as hers did, and he wanted nothing more than to stare at her smile for days.

"El," He stopped in his tracks.

She turned around, stopping as well to wait for him, “Yeah?”

“Um I, uh, I love you.”

Her world stopped. She'd heard those words from countless others. From Joyce almost every night. From Jonathan and Will whenever she had a bad day. From Nancy whenever she went to her for advice. She'd heard it from all these people she cared for deeply, but never from Mike.

Her mind raced back to two years earlier, when Joyce first explained to her what love was. Since then she had shut down the possibility of love. She believed others meant no harm when they said it to her, but she couldn't bring herself to consider it to be real.

But the way Mike looked at her, a blush forming as he stood like a deer in headlights, she knew it wasn't the same. She knew he would never lie to her, he started his foundation with her on openness and honesty all the way through. Mike said how he felt, never just covering it up with different words or phrases.

Mike had told her he loved her, and for the first time in her life, she believed it. She believed he wasn't lying or hiding any truths.

El had always known how Mike felt about her, and how she felt about him. That label of love still never crossed her mind, she still thought of it as nothing more than a lie people tell others and themselves.

But when Mike said he loved her, she didn't know what to think. She knew that if this concept of love was real, Mike was the person she loved most. She knew her feelings for him were nothing but pure happiness and affection.

For the first time in her life, El believed love was more than what Brenner had taught her it was.

“I love you too.”

El was fifteen years old the first time she told someone she loved them, and the feeling was freeing. After that day she wasn't scared to tell people she loved them back. For the first time, love was more

than just a word, it was a feeling. El had made the choice to stop believing what the lab had taught her, and instead believe all the feelings she felt towards the people she cared about. She was sure those feelings were love, she refused to let her past give her doubts on that anymore.

She stopped holding back her feelings. After that day, she told people how she felt as often as she could. Her heart beat a little faster every time she saw the red blush that overtook Mike's face when she said it to him.

Love was tainted for El for so many years, but she made the decision to let go of the definition the lab had given her, and to instead create her own.

Over the years, love became important to El. Following her into adulthood, it became reassurance and care and most of all, strength.

That brought El to today. She woke up with a nightmare, one of the recurring ones that plagued her sleep night after night for years. The Demogorgon was back, she was sent to the Upside Down, all her friends and family were killed and she was alone.

She woke up in a sweat, breathing in and out repeatedly. Joyce had told her to do that so many years earlier, and she still followed the advice.

For a few seconds El's mind raced, not quite yet realizing the dream was over. Grief over her lost loved ones had yet to disappear, until she rolled onto her side to check the time.

It was 3:38AM, and the her moppy-haired husband was snoring beside her. El let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Mike's sleepy face. She always loved watching him sleep, he looked so peaceful it helped her calm down. Watching the boy she loved look so content automatically made everything better for El.

Her breathing had slowed down, along with the racing of her mind. Yet her heart still beat twice as fast and she could feel the adrenaline pumping through her.

"Mike, Mike," She nudged his shoulder, not wanting to be alone in the dark room.

He groaned for a second before snapping his eyes open, alert the second he realized El needed him, "Hey, what's going on?"

Instinctively he reached for her hand, squeezing as tight as he could. She looked down, not wanting to meet his eyes.

"Nightmare."

Mike was well-used to El's nightmares. He had been helping her with them since he was 13. He used to stay up all night just in case she ever needed him. He was always a phone call away, even during the darkest hour of night. Things got easier when he went off to college. Him and El moved in together, not only were they always there for the other, but just falling asleep in the others arms limited the amount of nightmares.

There were still bad nights though. Nights when the worst memories resurfaced and even worse fantasies popped into their imaginations, but luckily they always had each other just a few inches away.

When El told Mike she had a nightmare he immediately launched into the spiel he'd been doing since he was thirteen years old.

"Are you okay? Breath with me." He started taking deep breaths, holding onto her hand like he was clinging for his life. She pulled herself closer to him, wrapping her other hand around his neck and looked into his deep brown eyes, starting to breath at the pace he gave her.

She just stared up into his eyes, the same ones she'd fallen in love with and continued to love unwaveringly her entire life.

When she felt her breathing finally return to a normal pace he stopped, "Do you wanna talk about it?"

She shook her head, and he thought of something to take her mind off the nightmare.

"Turn around."

She adjusted her position so she was facing the other side, with Mike as the big spoon. He started tracing onto her back.

“Guess what I'm writing.”

He started moving his finger along her back. With anyone else, that move would have sent shivers up her spine, but with Mike she felt completely safe in his arms.

She guessed the first few letters, but let him keep tracing the rest of the word just to feel his hands on her.

“Michelle?” She guessed to him, referencing their baby daughter, sound asleep in the room over.

Mike kissed her shoulder, “Yeah. Now try this one.”

El felt him start to trace new letters onto her back, and she grinned at the realization of what he wrote.

“Promise?”

“Yup!” Another kiss to her shoulder.

She figured she knew what he would write before he even started tracing the third message onto her. Even still, she felt her smile open up and a familiar rush of red at it.

She turned around to face him, a blush occupied his face as well. El put her hand on his cheek, “I love you too, so much.”

She leaned in and kissed him for a moment, before pulling away.

“Are you feeling better?” El nodded and smiled, her heartbeat had slowed down, and the events of her dream were already erasing themselves from her memory, “Good, now you should try and get some sleep.”

He gave her another quick peck on the lips and she smiled, pulling herself into his arms before shutting her eyes.

“Mike,” She let out, right as sleep was about to take her away.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

He smiled shyly at her, even after so many years together, he still blushed every time he heard it, “You just said that.”

“I know,” El looked up at him, “But I wanna say it again. I love you.”

“I love you too, El.”

She shut her eyes once more and thought back to when she was 15 years old, saying that phrase to him for the first time. She wondered how she ever could have doubted how she felt. El had so many people she loved, from Mike to Michelle to all of her friends and family. The idea that she ever couldn't believe in love was a mystery.

Dr. Brenner had taken that from her years earlier, and tainted it in ways that would take her so long to get over. But even still, she was lucky. El had so many people in her life, that even after the hardest of times, were still able to get her to believe in love, and to feel it so deeply.

And that's everything she could ever want.